

“I HAVE ALWAYS SAID WE WERE REBORN IN SWITZERLAND”:  
SWISS REFUGEE AND IMMIGRATION POLICY EXPLAINED IN A TRANSLATION OF  
*SIE WAREN EINST FLÜCHTLINGE*

by

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“I Have Always Said We Were Reborn in Switzerland”: Swiss Refugee and Immigration Policy

Explained in a Translation of *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Patrick Greaney

*Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge* is a collection of the biographies of nine individuals who came to Switzerland from different nations as refugees. Although each account varies dramatically in terms of its course and outcome, the common theme which runs through all of the chronicles is resettlement to Switzerland, largely due to the country's contingency refugee policy (*Kontingentsflüchtlingspolitik*), and an escape from the political circumstances which led these individuals there. The nine literary portraits are told by former refugees from Hungary, Tibet, former Czechoslovakia, Chile, Vietnam, Poland, Bosnia, Iran, and Somalia. The book was sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an organization whose goal is to ensure the protection of refugees in collaboration with individual nations and non-governmental organizations. Journalist Michael Walther was commissioned with collecting these stories, all of which are told by the refugees themselves and in the first person narrative.

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## Swiss immigration and refugee policies

### I. Introduction

Switzerland occupies a fundamentally unique position in Europe for the topic of migration and refugee policy due to several key factors. These include its geographic positioning at the center of Europe, its rejection of membership in the European Union and subsequent relations between the nation and the EU, its longstanding humanitarian traditions and policy of declared political neutrality, and its multicultural, multilingual composition. The Swiss Confederation has also played a significant role in the international acceptance of immigrants and refugees due to its policies, many of which have been formed through the country's affiliation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This relationship initially began after World War II at the time when Switzerland joined the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe and its subsequent organizational forms; the connection was further intensified as a consequence of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, Switzerland's first major involvement with the UNHCR.

Although such cooperation with international organizations is in no way exclusive to Switzerland, the country's contingency refugee policy (*Kontingentsflüchtlingspolitik*) is what has primarily set the country's migration policy apart since the 1950s. Citing a 2001 report from the Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police, Michael Walther defines the term as follows:

Contingency refugees are neither refugees in the more narrow sense nor migrants in the broader sense. As refugees, they have found refuge in a country of initial asylum, but are unable to remain there due to impending deportation, lack of options for medical treatment, the impossibility of integration, or a grant of protection which is only temporary. In addition to voluntary return and integration in the initial country of acceptance, resettlement in a third country is one of the three permanent solutions available to the UNHCR as part of the fulfillment of its mandate (145, my translation).

Contingency refugees are defined by a unique set of circumstances. In addition, the contingency policy is thus less grounded in case-by-case selection criteria for individuals or families and instead more on group-centered decisions based on international events and extenuating circumstances such as war, political occupation, ethnic cleansing, or other similar measures. In certain cases, such as that of Tibet, it has allowed for a common identification among refugees as groups who are then allowed to maintain their own culture while receiving assistance with integration into Swiss society. In other situations, the program has also made it possible for initial orientation measures about the future host country, such as Switzerland, as well as language courses, both of which are able to take place prior to arrival in the destination country (Walther 146). *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge* focuses on both Switzerland's overall immigration and asylum guidelines in a national framework as well as the adoption and implementation of its contingency refugee policy through the nine refugee narratives selected for the anthology.

## **II. Historical overview of Swiss immigration and refugee policies**

Swiss policy on immigration and asylum has long been the subject of intense focus, both domestically and on an international scale. Although the issues occupy a pivotal position in contemporary discussions of current affairs, the topics are in no way unique to the present times: in the case of Switzerland, the history of these subjects can be traced back several centuries, documenting the country's longstanding traditions of refugee acceptance and policies based on humanitarian foundations. Numerous factors have historically distinguished Switzerland from other countries in terms of immigration and refugee policy. At the geographic niveau, former Swiss government councilor Carl Ludwig, author of one the most comprehensive examinations of Swiss immigration policy, cites the country's favorable location for migration, particularly from its

immediate neighbors and as well as those across Western and Central Europe; he also points to Switzerland's "political, confessional, and cultural diversity" as further relevant factors for the acceptance and integration of immigrants and refugees (14).

Although accommodating refugees is not an aspect which in any way particularly differentiates Switzerland from other nations, deliberation regarding the existence of a nation based on reasons of internal fragmentation and diversity is something which sets the country apart. At the governmental level, Switzerland has been referred to as having 'neither a real center, nor a real state'<sup>1</sup> due to the substantial power possessed by individual cantons in Switzerland as compared to that of the federal government (Kriesi and Trechsel 5). Indeed, the country's structure, including factors such as linguistic and cultural alignments, is comprised of so many different entities and shaped by such extensive diversity that an ongoing debate has emerged about whether a Swiss nation or nationality even exists. As Thomas Fleiner notes in *Swiss Constitutional Law*, "Often the Swiss nation is depicted as a *Willensnation* – a nation based on the will of the People to belong to the state and the nation" (145); Caroline Wiedmer echoes the same idea in her assessment of Switzerland as a "voluntary nation, based neither on ethnic or religious nor linguistic unity, under the wings of the federal government" (44). This conception of a country bound together by the volition of its citizens is based on a set of shared political philosophies. As Kriesi and Trechsel explain, "Switzerland constitutes a successful federation of 'nations'. Its citizens are welded together by a *common political culture*, i.e. by a common attachment to a set of fundamental political principles and institutions" (11). This description develops the view that Switzerland is held together less by the same factors which hold other comparable nations together; instead, belief in and realization of a concept of nationhood stems from a vision of that nation shared by the populace. At the same time, the very fact that Switzerland's status as a nation can be questioned also renders it difficult to realize a delineated

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Badie, Bertrand and Pierre Birnbaum. *Sociologie de l'Etat*. Paris: Grasset, 1982.

policy of exclusion when it comes to issues of immigration. If there is nothing about the country besides will of conviction that binds it together, there cannot be anything besides the lack of will to belong to that nation or belief in the country's political systems which bars other individuals from it. How, then, can exclusionist policies which prohibit or limit the acceptance of refugees be justified? For many reasons, it is this question which has made Swiss immigration policy so challenging to define and enforce, both historically as well as in contemporary Switzerland.

### **Swiss immigration and refugee policies prior to 1939**

Ludwig traces the development of immigration to Switzerland to the late 1600s as a point from which it can be seen as such in the framework of an established state.<sup>2</sup> In the seventeenth century, the majority of refugees sought the country out as a destination for religious reasons; such groups included the Huguenots and the Waldensians (Ludwig 14-16). This century of immigration driven by religious motives was followed by a period of relocation for political motives, including the French Revolution.

Although Switzerland's foreign population only totaled 3% in the mid-nineteenth century, a dramatic increase in foreigner influx took place from that time until shortly after the onset of World War I: by 1915, the percentage of foreigners in Switzerland had risen to 15% (Wiedmer 47). During this period, the country therefore began seeing the need to specifically address the issue of immigration. Ludwig references a speech made by Federal Council member Numa Droz to the National Council in 1888 that has proven representative of the country's historical attitude toward the subject of immigration: "One of the most important sovereignty rights is the right to asylum. We have thus always opened our house in the most liberal way to political refugees, generally not due to

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of an established nation state is expressly noted to avoid confusion with immigration to the territory which is now Switzerland, e.g. by Germanic tribes, including the Alemanns and the Burgundians, starting in 4 CE (Dürrenmatt 14).



sympathy for the individual or his or her doctrines, but instead for humanitarian reasons” (Ludwig 22). Droz’s speech demonstrates that Switzerland’s policy in the late nineteenth century included an established – though not unchallenged – commitment to the humanitarian aspects of immigration. The speech was also presented just fourteen years after the Swiss constitution had undergone a series of major revisions to create a constitutional version that remains, by and large, in force to date and which constitutes the framework for the Swiss federal state (Kriesi and Trechsel 4).<sup>3</sup> It was also issued only three years prior to another constitutional referendum (Dürrenmatt 567)<sup>4</sup> which included the addition of the right to freedom of religion (Fleiner-Gerster 24), representing a cornerstone of Switzerland’s refugee policy. In the years that followed, Switzerland’s immigration and refugee policies became increasingly restrictive, especially in response to World War I. Following a series of conservative measures in the post-war years, in 1924, the Federal Council enacted a series of regulations “which were to restrict both immigration and naturalization laws, i.e., both the entry into the country and the ability to remain” (Wiedmer 48). Although Droz’s remarks at the end of the nineteenth century were influenced by Switzerland’s openness to the acceptance of foreigners that would remain a part of its constitution to date, by the 1920s, the country’s policy had dramatically shifted to reflect the events and pressures of the age.

### **Swiss immigration and refugee policies 1939-1960**

Today and in recent decades, Switzerland’s immigration policies during World War II have received widespread attention, especially with regard to the question of compensation payments and asset ownership. The country’s refugee policy, however, was initially paid little attention in the years

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<sup>3</sup> The constitutional reform of 1874 included freedom of commerce and trade as well as freedom of residence (Kriesi and Trechsel 3).

<sup>4</sup> The Swiss constitution was again revised in 1891 to reinforce Switzerland’s concepts of direct democracy. It additionally underwent a further revision process in 1999, but this most recent version includes no significant modifications beyond textual revision (Fleiner-Gerster 24).

immediately following the war; other issues, such as the war economy and journalism, instead rose to the forefront (Kreis 103). It was not until 1954 that the first historical accounts of the issue of Swiss immigration policy during World War II were compiled based on documents from German archives; these records ultimately offered a critical verdict of the country's interwar refugee policies (Kreis 104). A more comprehensive analysis was published in 1957, when the Swiss Federal Council commissioned Carl Ludwig with compiling a report on the country's refugee policy during the war (Kreis 104). The Ludwig Report, as it became known, revealed both positive and negative facets of the Swiss refugee policy: on the one hand, the findings from the report were able to demonstrate that there was no doubt as to the "sincere volition of the Federal Council, the department, and the police division with its assistants, to do everything possible for refugees," particularly in light of the fact that there was no guarantee until late in the war that Switzerland would not be attacked; that there were well founded concerns regarding public safety, order, food, and housing; and that considerable attention had been paid to the risk of an influx of immigrants during the war years that the country would be unequipped to handle (372). On the other hand, Ludwig also explicitly states that there can also be no doubt as to the fact that "a less conservative admissions policy would have spared the deaths of a countless number of those persecuted" (372). Ludwig declines to provide an ultimate verdict, noting that not only is such a judgment beyond the task of the author, but that coming to a fair assessment would be extraordinarily difficult (372).<sup>5</sup> Despite the lack of definitive conclusion provided in the report, Switzerland had already made attempts to rectify what had been criticized as shortcomings in its wartime immigration policies by introducing permanent asylum and federal contributions to refugee welfare in 1947 (Kreis 103).

The foundation of Switzerland's modern-day policies on refugee issues after World War II, especially in terms of its contingency refugee policies, began with the foundation of the Office of the

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<sup>5</sup> In this same context, Ludwig also notes that comparing Switzerland's asylum policies with those of other countries is impossible, especially due to the fact that the Swiss situation was wholly unlike that of any other nation, particularly following the occupation of Germany (374).

UNHCR. The UNHCR was founded by the United Nations General Assembly in 1951 with the purpose of aiding the resettlement of displaced persons from World War II (Walther 147). It serves as the central institution for issues regarding “human rights and international responsibility, conflict resolution, preventative diplomacy, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance” (Loescher 2). Switzerland’s specific involvement with exiles, followed by its involvement with the organization itself, became well-known through both criticism and praise of its policies for accepting Jews and other refugees during the war; the UNHCR’s guidelines and recommendations for refugee acceptance provided Switzerland with substantiated guidelines and an outside source for establishing how it would address the issue. After the Second World War, Switzerland’s next major involvement with refugees took place with the onset of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution; by 1957, 12,000 Hungarian refugees had arrived in Switzerland seeking asylum, drawn in part by the large number of refugees from the country who had already been accepted there (Walther 149). Switzerland’s specific involvement with the Hungarian refugees was based on the UNHCR and its contingency strategies. Switzerland then continued its tradition of accepting refugees from other countries based on extreme political events, which, over the years, have included war, totalitarian regimes, national occupation, political unrest, and religious persecution.

### **Contemporary Swiss immigration and refugee policies**

Immigration and asylum are topics which routinely dominate political discourse and policy decisions in Switzerland today. Due to the country’s comparatively small geographic area, living space and resources are perpetual sources of concern. In addition, a rapid increase in foreigners following the years of World War II to one million by 1970 has had two significant consequences: widespread xenophobia and trepidation over a lack of integration (Wiedmer 49). These fears about integration and sense of identity are also issues which frequently appear in public debate on the

subject, particularly generated by the discourse of right-wing political parties. Among such parties, the SVP, or Swiss People's Party, is the largest and most popular in terms of votes and electoral power. Once considered to be an extreme radical right-wing party, the SVP entered the political mainstream in the early 1990s by espousing a series of platform modifications and "adopting an agenda and a rhetoric comparable to other radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe" (Skenderovic 123). Although firmly remaining on the right of the political spectrum, the SVP became significantly less radical in an effort to become a major player in Swiss politics. Since its fundamental transformation, the SVP has positioned migration and asylum topics as central facets of its platform and framed these issues as threats to Switzerland by targeting voters' sense of security and identity. Such rhetorical tactics in political campaigns mark a significant shift in the representation of immigration in the Swiss democratic arena; prior to the 1990s, issues of migration had played only a minor role in Swiss elections and instead increasingly focused on objective data such as employment rates and economic concerns (Skenderovic 163-4).

Largely influenced by this discourse from the SVP, migration issues now rank among the most intensely argued topics in Switzerland; however, such debate is often presented using an emotional, rather than objective, approach. Statistical facts become all the more important against such a background. The most recent immigration figures published by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in the second half of 2012 show that 34.7% of the population aged 15 or over has an immigration background.<sup>6</sup> Statistics further reveal that although the number of individuals living in Switzerland who have been issued a Swiss passport more than tripled between 1992 and 2012, "only 2 out of 100 foreigners living in Switzerland have been granted Swiss citizenship"; the website of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office further expressly notes that "this is a small percentage compared to

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<sup>6</sup> The breakdown of this figure is as follows: "In 2012, 34.7% of the permanent resident population aged 15 or over in Switzerland, i.e. 2,335,000 persons, had an immigration background. A third of this population (853,000) have Swiss citizenship. Four fifths of persons with an immigration background are themselves immigrants (first generation foreigners and native-born and naturalized Swiss citizens), whereas one fifth were born in Switzerland (second generation foreigners and native-born and naturalized Swiss citizens)" (Swiss Federal Statistical Office).

other countries.” Corresponding statistics on asylum figures in Switzerland provided by the Swiss Population and Household statistics show that, in 2012, there were a total of 44,300 individuals currently involved in the asylum process living in Switzerland (Swiss Federal Statistical Office). Given a current Swiss populace aged 15 or over of 6,736,000, this current data on immigration and asylum in Switzerland indicates that the total percentage of individuals 15 or over currently involved in the asylum process is 0.66%. Even when asylum applications reached their peak in 1999 with a total of 104,700 individuals actively seeking out asylum status, the overall total was 1.55% of the population. In total number of asylum applications, according to information published in March 2013 by the Eurostat Press Office, the total number of applications for asylum submitted in 2012 in Switzerland for all ages was 28,445; by comparison, the only countries in the EU27 with more applications filed in that year were Germany (77,500), France (60,600), and Sweden (43,900). With the exception of Sweden, which only boasts a moderately larger population than that of Switzerland, these countries significantly outrank Switzerland in terms of overall population.

Although these statistics show that Switzerland ranks among the countries in Europe that process the largest number of asylum applications per inhabitants and that the percentage of the Swiss population with an immigration background is substantial at 34.7%, critics of Swiss refugee policies often argue that Switzerland does not accept enough refugees given its history and position of neutrality. The UNHCR even notes that Switzerland is considered to be extremely significant as a nation in terms of its acceptance of individuals facing political or religious persecution; still, such figures and statements have done little to placate those who would have Switzerland accept greater responsibility for individuals seeking asylum. Statistically, the latest figures from the Swiss Federal Office for Migration released on 30 September 2013 indicate the year to date total for open asylum processes in Switzerland as 42,746; of these open processes, 14.1% have been approved as of the date of publication. For the years 2001 to 2013, the highest acceptance rate (*Anerkennungsquote*) for asylum applications was 2008: 23%.

### III. Refugee narratives in *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge*

*Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge* is a collection of nine refugee narratives as well as an extensive subsequent analysis of Switzerland's refugee and asylum policies, both in general and with specific focus on the narrators' countries of origin. In particular, the work addresses Switzerland's contingency refugee policy, which it implemented as part of its association with the UNHCR. The policy is advocated throughout the stories and the comprehensive follow-up analysis written by Michael Walther; although the practice has not been implemented for many years, the issue remains one that plays a central role in Switzerland's discussion of immigration and refugee policies today.

The nine accounts of emigration to Switzerland told in *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge* are stories that can be read in two ways: first, they merit express attention to the courage and struggles of the narrators themselves, both as singular human beings as well as representatives of their respective countries. At the same time, the narratives each convey a significance which extends beyond their particular individualities, instead communicating messages of political unrest and upheaval, the situations of refugees in the past and the present, and the importance of international organizations responsible for organizing relocation to safe environments for those who lack such circumstances. Although all of these narratives ultimately revolve around relocation in one country, namely Switzerland, they also transcend national, and indeed continental, boundaries.

One of the most evident aspects of these resettlement accounts is that they share a common foundation as part of Switzerland's contingency refugee policy (*Kontingentsflüchtlingspolitik*). In the 1950s, Switzerland introduced an extensive contingency refugee policy as a continuation of its humanitarian tradition of refugee acceptance, specifically in the response to the events of the Hungarian Uprising (Walther 148). Following the successful implementation of the policy in the 1960s, it was put on hold in the 1970s. Reasons for the temporary abandonment of the practice

included the economic recession and a rapid increase in the number of asylum applications, but it was provisionally reinstated to accommodate refugees from the former Yugoslavia during the 1991-1995 war (Walther 145). Although not practiced since, the topic of contingency resettlement policy remains current today: the 2009 UNHCR asylum symposium specifically focused on the issue. More recently, the question has received widespread attention in Swiss media due to the ongoing conflict in Syria.

### **Ganden Tethong and Tibetan refugees in Switzerland**

The first narrative is the story of Ganden Tethong, a woman whose parents were asked to head the first Tibetan house – at that time, the houses were grouped by nationality – in Switzerland at the Pestalozzi Children’s Village, located in the canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, in the 1960s. Although Tethong’s parents enjoyed a relatively favorable status due to factors such as education and vocation in their respective homelands – Tethong’s father was Tibetan and her mother Indian – at the time they emigrated to Switzerland, Tibet had already been placed under Chinese occupation and was no longer an independent nation, making even those with more power susceptible to a lack of future independence. This situation led to both the establishment of Tibetan foster care homes in various countries around the world, including Switzerland, as well as Tethong’s parents’ status as refugees upon arrival. Tethong, along with her siblings, was born and raised in Switzerland, but would only go on to naturalize years later when a lack of citizenship would have posed a roadblock to becoming a bar-certified attorney.

Tibet’s status in the framework of Swiss immigration policy was unique. Just like the group in which Tethong and her parents arrived in Switzerland, the first Tibetan arrivals to Switzerland were not individuals, but instead groups, which the Swiss government called *Kontingente*, or contingents. Despite the austerity of the term (which the Tibetan refugees themselves did not use,

instead preferring terms such as *houses* to describe a singular group living in the Children's Village), Tethong acknowledges the fact that immigration in groups served as a significant advantage for the refugees in terms of formation of community, political organization, and also meant Tibetan arrivals to Switzerland included families as opposed to sole wage earners. The other unique factor in the Tibetan case is that the Swiss government did not view assimilation as a requirement, or even necessarily as particularly advantageous. In the accompanying text from *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge*, Michael Walther explains

The unique part about the integration of the Tibetan refugees in Switzerland is that there was never a goal in place to 'assimilate' them. Due to their cultural and ethnic identity, it appeared evident that they would never be on the path toward becoming Swiss, but would instead always remain Tibetans in Switzerland. The result of that aim was a pluralistic integration that was not geared toward unconditional assimilation and that coexistence could be improved through a form of cultural exchange based on equal rights (155, my translation).

The effects of such policies were profound: it ultimately meant the protection of the Tibetans' identities in their cultural framework, both as individuals as well as that of the collective group. Allowing the Tibetan immigrants to remain Tibetans without forcing a Swiss cultural identity upon them provided space to cultivate the close ties of family life, to freely practice religion, and to create and strengthen group-specific contacts in the Tibetans' own community (Walther 156). At the same time, such policies did not mean that life was easy for the new Tibetan refugees; like any other refugee group, they suffered displacement in terms of social hierarchy and often struggled to achieve respect as equals in their new country due to linguistic, cultural, religious, and social differences. The historical timeframe, though, is one noteworthy factor which distinguishes the way in which refugees were received back when Tethong's parents emigrated and the way in which many refugees are treated today. In her biography, Tethong remarks that "first Tibetans back in 1960 were considered exotic and innocent [...] they were met with a different sense of openness than today's immigrants"



(42). Especially at the time, the Tibetans benefited from a sense of solidarity from the Swiss given Switzerland's own circumstances: both countries are small in terms of area and face constant pressure from larger nations which border them geographically; both share similarities as mountainous, high-altitude countries; and both have faced a threat of domination – one which has become a reality for Tibet – by foreign aggressors (Walther 155).

### **Husein Kararic and refugees from Bosnia in Switzerland**

Husein Kararic's narrative of his family's escape to Switzerland presents a story both similar and dissimilar to that of Ganden Tethong's: both individuals' families come from a country which experienced political conflict, ultimately resulting in large-scale emigration. However, whereas Tethong's family was asked to relocate to Switzerland on a voluntary basis, wartime internment and ethnic cleansing necessitated that Kararic and his family seek safe refuge elsewhere as a course of action mandatory for survival. Despite these differences, one of the primary similarities between the two situations in terms of Swiss refugee policy is again that of contingency policy. Although the practice was well established and widely supported by the time Tethong's family was relocated to Switzerland from Tibet, the policy had been largely eliminated by the UNHCR in the 1970s; instead of massive, group-wise resettlement projects, the newly established policy meant that asylum should be granted on the basis of case-by-case humanitarian need for individuals and much smaller groups (Walther 181). In response to the civil war in the former Yugoslavia beginning in the summer of 1991 and lasting through 1995, the Swiss Federal Council mandated the provisional acceptance of individuals within the framework of a humanitarian campaign for children and victims of the war on October 28, 1992, only a few months after the process of ethnic cleansing had begun (Walther 181). Due to the scale and severity of the events which unfolded in the former Yugoslavia, Switzerland decided to temporarily abandon the UNHCR policy introduced in the 1970s to accommodate a larger

number of refugees from the area. This led to the enactment of the “Aktion 1000/5000” in which one thousand individuals were granted asylum status, all of whom had the right to initiate family reunification processes; in the end, a total of 1,700 Bosnians were granted asylum, which amounted to the largest number in all of Europe (Walther 181).

Such group-based asylum constitutes a part of Switzerland’s contingent refugee policy, allowing a number of individuals from one area or nation to be granted asylum at one time. In the case of Husein Kararic, the policy allowed his immediate family access to resettlement in Switzerland and also enabled a significant number of other Bosnians to relocate to the country. Many of these individuals, including Kararic and his family, ultimately applied for and received permanent residency and citizenship in Switzerland. This outcome is largely attributable to the contingency policy of the time: even refugees who arrived in Switzerland only days after the refugee limit had been met faced significantly more difficult circumstances, such as the denial of work permits for up to a decade in specific cases (Walther 182). For those who were part of the Aktion 1000/5000, the path toward relocation and integration was appreciably smoother: as Kararic describes in his narrative, “I have always said we were reborn in Switzerland. We did, in effect, begin a new life here. We are well integrated here, and so are our children” (118).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Switzerland’s fluctuating migration policies enacted over the course of several centuries, and particularly in the twentieth century, have had a significant impact on both individuals who have specifically sought the country out as their destination as well as on those who were beneficiaries of the country’s contingency policies for relocation. They have also undoubtedly had a profound impact on what it means to live in Switzerland and to be Swiss, including the ways in which elements such

as multiculturalism and ethnicity are experienced (Wiedmer 51). For those who provided their stories in *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge*, there has also been a profound personal impact evident through disclosures made by the interviewees (Lunshof 8).

Beyond the scope of the individual, these narratives also embody an experience which is shared by a vast number of individuals internationally. Issues of immigration and asylum are as present in current international affairs as they were during the time of the Huguenots, the French Revolution, the world wars, the initial period of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, or the Bosnian War. Although policy decisions for such matters remain firmly in the hands of individual nations and international nongovernmental organizations, past experiences can serve as valuable guides for understanding the ramifications and implications of future decisions. In this framework, *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge* is an example of a work deserving of international recognition. Despite any manifest advocacy for specific policy, the anthology predominantly remains one whose focus is humanitarian in nature: it is a work about the suffering imposed upon human lives due to political circumstances and the consequences of international policy told from the perspective of the individuals whose lives have been most directly affected by those forces.

## Translations of refugee narratives from *Sie waren einst Flüchtlinge*

### V. Ganden Tethong: “The Swiss government should stop bowing down to the Chinese”

*Ganden Tethong's mother and father were the first Tibetans to settle in Switzerland and the first Tibetan parents at the Pestalozzi International Village. Ganden was educated in Switzerland and became an attorney. Her husband is Swiss. Together, they own a law firm and have two daughters.*

My father is his parents' second son. There were seven surviving siblings altogether. The others did not reach adulthood. His official year of birth was 1921, but, in reality, he is somewhat younger. Actual age is not important for Tibetans; no official record of births was kept back in the old Tibet.

My father comes from what people call a good Tibetan family. Both his father and his brother held positions in the Tibetan government. The family comes from Shigatse, where their property was also located, but they lived wherever my grandfather was stationed. My father was born in Derge in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham and lived there until he was six years old. My grandfather was an army commander and later became a provincial governor. The family went on to settle in the capital of Lhasa, Tibet's economic and cultural center, after my grandfather had applied for a position there. When you talk about distance in Tibet, it is always in units of several days in the saddle. Tibet originally spanned 2.5 million square kilometers, a space in which Switzerland would fit seventy times over.

My father is what is called a Tulku – the thirteenth Dalai Lama recognized him as the reincarnation of a former lama when he was three. My father believes that political factors may have also played a role. When the sons of wealthy families were recognized as reincarnations, monasteries could expect to receive greater financial backing. The smaller monasteries, like the one to which my

father belonged, were dependent on such support. The fact that he was identified as an incarnation is not significant in and of itself. The important thing for my father is that it gave him a truly comprehensive monastic education.

When he was eight years old, he first went to this “home monastery,” which was considered small, since it had just 500 monks and only offered an elementary education. At eleven, he entered the Drepung Monastery in the Lhasa metropolitan area, which, with a total of 7,700 monks, is one of the four largest of the several thousand monasteries in Tibet.

He completed his education in Drepung as a Geshe Lharampa; Geshas are known as the protectors of Buddhist knowledge and are scholars of the philosophical and religious writings. Lharampa is the highest of four levels. His education was comprised of a comprehensive study of the humanities and history. Upon graduating, he moved to the extremely rigorous Tantric College in Lhasa. My father was particularly interested in education, so, when he was 26, he continued his studies in India beginning in 1948/49.

The neighboring country to the south has long served as Tibet’s door to the world. Large quantities of goods that were not able to be produced in Tibet were imported from India as the trade and transport route to India is especially close to Lhasa, which is located in southern Tibet. There are also connections between the two countries in terms of religion and writing systems; although Tibetan sounds different, the letters still originally derive from Sanskrit. Back in the 1950s, many children from families who could afford it were sent to India, and especially to English boarding schools. Because of these factors, there had always been a strong connection. For my father, it had always been clear that he would complete his further education there. The journey to India took approximately 18 days riding time. Animal transport was long the common means of transport in Tibet; prior to the arrival of the Chinese in 1949, there were barely more than three cars driving around Lhasa.

My father left the monastic order before moving to India. In Buddhism, there is no risk of being excommunicated for doing so; it is enough to simply tell the Lama that you no longer wish to follow the monastic path as a vocation. Many Tibetans are monks in their younger years and then later give it up. Others, in turn, get married, become widows, and then join a monastery.

1949 was a complex year. After the takeover by the Communist Party, the newly founded People's Republic of China reasserted its claim to Tibet under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The occupation was subtle and, at the beginning, not particularly evident.

My father's departure to India was not connected with the occupation. In different places, primarily at the universities of Shantiniketan in northwest Calcutta and Poona, he perfected his knowledge of Sanskrit – he had already started learning the language with the Tibetan scholar Gendün Chöpel in Lhasa – and learned Hindi. After that, he also worked as an assistant to a professor in Delhi. In 1956, he was hired by the newly founded Tibetan segment of the Indian state radio (“All India Radio”) in New Delhi as a host and writer. At the same time, he continued his humanities studies and kept his position as a university assistant.

My mother is from Ladakh, located in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which makes her an Indian citizen. Ladakh is traditionally considered to be part of greater Tibet. From a cultural and ethnic standpoint, the majority of Ladakh's inhabitants are Tibetan.

The language of the region – Ladakhi – is a Tibetan dialect that differs from High Tibetan in much the same way that German in the Swiss canton of Wallis differs from that of German in Hamburg; in other words, the two are essentially different languages. The landscape in Ladakh is similar to that in Tibet. It is located at a similar altitude; on average, villages are located at 3,500 meters, or 11,500 feet, above sea level. There has always been active trading between Ladakh and Tibet. Many monks spent a couple of years of their education in Tibet; this was also the case for two great uncles from my mother's side of the family.

Since India's independence in 1947, the region has officially been part of India and is now also referred to as Small Tibet. From today's perspective, the fact that it belongs to India is a stroke of luck: India gives the Ladakhis far more rights to freedom than the Chinese give the Tibetans, and because of that, I would much rather see the rest of Tibet under the control of India than of China.

My mother's background is also considerably different from that of my father in terms of social factors. She comes from a family of farmers and doctors: her father was a farmer, but also worked as a traditional Tibetan healer. My mother was born in 1934 – in her case, the date of birth is accurate. Because Ladakh was very underdeveloped, even by Indian standards, she was selected at 13 as the youngest in a group of eight teenagers to receive an education “abroad” in the main part of India. To a certain extent, the program was part of a development project due to Ladakh's inadequate educational infrastructure.

Girls were consciously included in this group, and my mother was one of the two chosen. In the beginning, the objective was to teach her technical skills, just like the rest of the group members; due to her young age, though, it was decided that it would make more sense to give her an academic education. She was thus placed in the care of a family from Srinagar, the summer administrative center of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, for several years. The head of the family was a good man who was well educated, progressive, and forward thinking, and my mother was consequently the first and only girl to be placed in a school with several hundred boys at the onset of coeducation. As a Ladakhi in Kashmir, she had already stood out enough.

During the first school vacation, she traveled back home by foot; back in those days, there were no drivable streets from India to Ladakh. The journey took her 22 days with much of the roads covered in snow. She had to leave her suitcase with presents for the family behind along the way. After that initial trip, she only again returned to her homeland after completing tenth grade as the first person from Ladakh to do so.

My mother also ended up being hired by All India Radio. The program managers wanted a female editor and speaker for the new Ladakhi department to serve as a type of role model. Her role there meant that my mother and father met as journalists at All India Radio in the mid-1950s.

They married in 1958. On March 10 of the following year, there was a national uprising in Lhasa against the Chinese occupation, which set off a major wave of people fleeing the country. Tens of thousands of Tibetans were killed. Thousands followed the fourteenth Dalai Lama into his Indian exile.

The news situation became correspondingly intensive. My father was the one who announced on the air that the Dalai Lama had arrived safely in India. For the Tibetans, that was important news. My older sister, Tsering, was born in late 1959. She received Indian citizenship.

Shortly afterwards, the Tibetan exile government requested that my parents go work as youth workers in Switzerland at a Tibetan house that was about to be built in the Pestalozzi Children's Village in Trogen, which is located in the Swiss canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden. The Dalai Lama's brother, who had previously visited the Pestalozzi Village and who had spoken to those in charge about the offer to found a Tibetan house, became an advocate for the project. A married couple was needed to take care of the Tibetan children. My parents were specifically considered because they knew English after years of living in India and because they were familiar with the conventions of the Western world. Due to the lack of people to choose from, a pedagogical education was a secondary factor.

The Children's Village had been founded after World War II to contribute to international understanding. The orphans who were caught between the warring parties were meant to serve as an example of what society had not been able to do. The move toward opening its doors to non-European children was a major step for the Children's Village. The initial plans were for the arrival of twenty children, including full orphans, near orphans, and children who were not orphans at all.



My parents had good jobs in India. They enjoyed a very respectable standard of living, social recognition, and security. Moving to Switzerland was not something they had intended to do; no Tibetan had ever before settled in the country. My father was a Tibetan citizen, for which there was no official registry. Upon entering Switzerland, he and my oldest sister, who was an Indian citizen, received refugee status, although they hadn't fled in the actual sense of the term. Because of China's unlawful occupation of Tibet, my father was not able to return to the home that he had left before the occupation, and my sister essentially inherited her refugee status from him. My mother retained her Indian citizenship.

My parents didn't want to refuse the request due to the emergency situation faced by the Tibetan children and out of a sense of solidarity with the Tibetan exile government. They saw it as their duty to fulfill the undertaking. They set a time limit of seven years for themselves. After that, they wanted to return to India.

On August 17, 1960, my parents and my oldest sister entered Switzerland. Two months later, three more adult caretakers and the twenty children followed; those three caretakers included my father's sister, who was included as a source of support to my parents due to her experience as a caretaker at an Indian boarding school. A few years later, a second Tibetan house was opened and my aunt assumed the leadership of that house. The children in the second house – at the Children's Village, we strictly referred to them as *houses*, not as *quotas* – included two of my father's brother's sons. That meant that later, in addition to my parents, I also had an aunt and two cousins at the Children's Village.

My parents suffered from tremendous homesickness. The job was rigorous. Both held a role as a caretaker, and my father additionally worked as a teacher. In the course of the years to come, they had more of their own children: my sister Tenzin was born in 1962, my brother Wangpo in 1963, I was born two years later, and my younger brother Rigzin was born in 1970. All of us inherited refugee status. Other groups of children also arrived in Trogen from India.

Life in the Children's Village didn't mean living in the lap of luxury. For years, my mother earned nothing. My father's income was modest. Financially, that meant a step backwards as compared to their jobs in India. They undoubtedly had to work harder than before. On top of everything there was the refugee status. Nevertheless, they accepted the situation. They are idealists who place the common good above their own interests. For that reason, they did their jobs well and happily and didn't complain despite the setbacks.

1967 would have been the year in which their intended stay in Switzerland was over, but by that point, four of their children were already living there. Although it wouldn't have been an issue to return to India at our ages, they found it difficult to simply say goodbye to the other twenty children with whom they had so recently established a relationship. That meant that the plans to return were rendered obsolete, which they certainly realized long before the seven years were over.

I experienced a very unique childhood and adolescence in the Children's Village. My parents, my sister, and I lived together with the other Tibetan children in a large house. At the time I was born, there were undoubtedly 25 to 30 people who lived there. It was very different from the core family structure in which most Swiss children were raised in the 1960s. In Tibet, although large families with numerous children and several generations living together are common, the unique situation with just a few adults and twenty children, like in the Children's Village, wasn't even something that happened there. For me, though, it was normal. It was the only situation I knew.

In complete contrast to the majority of Swiss children, we grew up in the Children's Village as part of an international community. Even though each household only comprised one nation, there was a significant amount of contact with the children from the other houses who were from different European, Asian, and – later, to an increasing degree – African countries. Growing up in such an international environment was different, but in a positive sense. You learn how to deal with other people in a relaxed way. Foreignness doesn't scare you off. In retrospect, this was a major advantage.

I don't particularly care for the term, but at the Children's Village, we indeed represented a multicultural community.

I went to preschool and the first years of elementary school inside of our Village. Some of the lessons were held in the individual house-based communities while others were together with children from other houses. The situation allowed me to come into contact with children of all ethnicities. Some of the students had arrived in the Children's Village after us, and they were older than I was. I spoke better German than children born in Switzerland, which somehow put me in a difficult position.

Moving to the public school to attend the fifth grade was difficult. At the Children's Village, we had had several teachers. My new class had 31 students and only one teacher. There were three foreign students: a German, an Ethiopian, and me. I wasn't excluded, though. The teacher was very understanding. But just the adaptation from the large family at the Children's Village, where everyone knew everyone and we had lived in a type of protected framework or special biotope, was difficult in and of itself. The kids in ninth grade had known each other since preschool. That situation meant that I never truly felt like I was a part of the group like everyone else. Geographically, the Children's Village is located in Switzerland, but at the same time, it's not a part of Switzerland, either. It is safe to say that I only officially arrived in my native country at the point at which I changed schools.

Two years later at what is called the *Gymnasium*, or most advanced high school, the starting point was the same for everyone: the classes were reformed with students from the entire half-canton. I liked the change. For six and a half years, until I graduated in 1984, I continued to live "up" in the Children's Village and went to school "down below": the Village is located up on a hill, and the cantonal school is located below the Swiss village, which is below the hillside. I had friends at school that I occasionally visited at home. The connections to my own family and to the children at the Pestalozzi Village continued to be the most intensive, though.

Other than that, there were no differences between myself and the other Swiss children. I played the piano, but lacked talent and didn't make enough effort. I showed great ambition in my main subjects though, and graduated effortlessly. I had a considerable advantage compared to foreign children whose mothers and fathers had to work in Switzerland as unskilled workers. Due to the fact that my parents valued education so highly, I was able to integrate into the school system easily. At school, I was always particularly interested in languages, which made me more similar to my father in terms of my interests – even if I wasn't at his level.

There were no culturally-based tensions during puberty. My parents were liberal and didn't tell us what we couldn't do. I was able to do what I wanted. I was responsible, and they gave me my space. I was even able to skip school without getting in trouble. They knew that I would perform well at the end of the day. They didn't specifically encourage relationships with children outside of the Children's Village. They would have allowed it, but simply didn't get involved: in reality, they didn't have the time for things like that.

Although we were each recognized as unique human beings, individuality was never a focus. That held true for both ourselves and for the foster children. The collective was what counted. We received little individual attention. We were definitely taken good care of, but we weren't coddled. The affection was always for everyone as a whole. Each and every child was well aware that he had to assume responsibility.

Our parents considered it important that we weren't treated as more important than the other children. The majority of the others had been given a difficult fate in life due to the loss of their parents. Our mother and father often reminded us to be considerate of that fact. On the other hand, the other children sometimes even had it better than we did: they had a clothing allowance and were able to attend schools we never would have been able to afford. From a material standpoint, they were well taken care of. My parents, by contrast, had to budget their income carefully, and we were always well aware of what wasn't possible before even daring to ask for it.

Three times – once when I was 11, then again at 14 and 17 – our parents spent the money to take us to India and Ladakh. Although it was expensive for them, they wanted us to meet our relatives and see the places they lived. It wasn't possible to travel to Tibet, though.

The restrictions didn't affect me in my childhood, though. I just didn't know things any other way. Today, I give my own children more individual attention. At the same time, I don't hold the opinion that my parents would have been able to do things differently or better given their situation.

My siblings all grew up in the same circumstances as I did. My oldest sister attended a school that focused on business. Tenzin and Wangpo graduated from the highest level of high school, just as I did. My youngest brother attended a different high school. After graduating, I took a gap year. First, I worked in the secretary's office at a different Children's Village in Zurich. That was pure coincidence; things easily could have been different. After that, I spent a longer period of time in the USA and in Canada visiting relatives.

I would have liked to become a pediatrician, but when I began devoting more attention to chemistry, biology, and physics at school, it soon became clear that it wasn't for me. I also would have liked to attend a hotel management school; due to the attendance fees, though, I scrapped that plan as well. I was interested in hotel management, tourism, and travel, but it was possible that I only had a vague concept of all three. When I returned from my gap year, I decided to study law, and it turned out that I was very talented at it. I discovered that there were a wide range of options for a law degree, and I decided that I could decide what I ultimately wanted to do after graduating.

I began my studies in October 1985 and finished them, going at an average pace, in the spring of 1991. While studying, I spent the majority of the time living with my siblings Tsering and Wangpo in Thalwil (Canton Zurich) and in Jona (Canton St. Gallen). My sister was already working as a secretary. My brother was at the University of Zurich with me studying history.

The role as foster parents in the Children's Village was the only Swiss job my parents ever held. Tibetan children from India continued to arrive. In 1986, my father retired and gave up his

position as a teacher and educator. Responsibility for the house was passed on to another couple – who, coincidentally, had been part of the first group of Tibetan children who had arrived from India. A different Tibetan couple took over the second house: the woman was also from the first group of children, and her husband had grown up in the Wahlwies Children's Village in Germany.

My mother, who didn't retire until 1996, ran the guest house on more time, and another she worked as an assistant in the second Tibetan house. There were fewer children than before. Twenty children in relatively close quarters together in one house: in the 1960s, that had been normal. Today, there is only one Tibetan house remaining, and some children from other countries also live there. The Children's Village concept has changed over time.

After graduating as a licensed attorney, I completed a number of different internships with the district attorney in Bülach (Canton Zurich), the district court in Pfäffikon (Canton Zurich), and at the district attorney's office in Zurich itself. In 1988, while I was still studying, I had naturalized as a Swiss citizen; doing so was a requirement for my internships in the canton of Zurich as well as for the bar examination; today, though, the bar is also open to non-Swiss citizens. I was admitted to the bar in Zurich in 1995.

My wedding was held one week before my oral bar examination, and luckily, many people helped out with the wedding preparations. I figured that if I had waited to get married until after my exam and not passed, the ambiance at the wedding would have been ruined.

My husband, Lucius Blattner, was a fellow student at law school and graduated in late 1990. He was born in 1964, is a Swiss citizen, and grew up in a middle-class family in and around Zurich with two siblings. At the time I met my husband, his father had already passed away; since then, his mother has also passed. My parents are very open: they hold prejudices against neither Swiss nor Tibetans and made no objection to the marriage. Seen from a completely objective point of view, though, it became clear to me that a marriage to a non-Tibetan could have caused difficulties.

One primary difference between me and my husband is that we grew up completely differently: he comes from a typical small family, which, for him, is limited to a close connection to his two siblings. Beyond that, he has little to no connections to anyone in his family. In my family's case, though, we nurture relationships to our cousins in India, Ladakh, and in the USA, and even if we don't see each other very often, we always keep each other up to date. The inner ties extend to a much larger circle of people.

At the same time, my husband and I are very similar in terms of our attitude toward Tibet. He is exceptionally open and involved, even if somewhat less now than before due to other commitments. This overlap between us is important; without it, our relationship would not work.

I worked for one year as an attorney in a law office, but when I became pregnant in late 1996 and wanted to have more freedom in my schedule, I decided to become self-employed and have been working as an attorney ever since. Dolma Laetitia was born in 1997, and our second child, who was born in 2000, is named Tashi Aurelia; our children's names reflect my heritage as well as my husband's. My husband began working at the district attorney's office and then joined me in 2002. Today, we run our own law office in Zurich together. In 2007, I earned a Master of Laws from the University of Bern with a focus on criminology.

At our law firm, I am responsible for administrative law cases, which often include approval procedures. I also deal with civil law, but the majority of my time is spent on criminal law cases – generally as a defense lawyer, but occasionally as a claimant representative. My task is to protect the defendant's rights and interests or those of the claimant; these are rights guaranteed to these individuals under the constitution and through laws. In criminal defense cases, the goal isn't to make alleged actions sound as if they were right; instead, it is my job to protect the defendant's rights and represent his or her standpoint.

It has been shown that a large percentage of the offenders are foreigners. Because I am a foreigner myself, I am used to dealing with people from other countries. Some clients find more trust

when they represent a foreigner, but I don't think that cultural differences make any difference when it comes to judging criminal offenses or need to be used as an excuse. There are simply rules that apply to everyone.

I occasionally take on legal work for Tibetans or Tibetan organizations. Our firm regularly handles pro bono work for the Tibet Office, the official representative office of the Dalai Lama in Switzerland located in Geneva. In addition, I also wrote contracts or review the contractual provisions for two major events: the Dalai's visits in 2005 and in 2008. The amount of work was significant but very satisfying, and played a significant role in both events taking place.

At the same time, I was more active in the Tibetan movement before motherhood. Right after graduating, I spent two years working as the president of the Association of Tibetan Youth in Europe, and served as a board member thereafter for just as long. I am a member of the Swiss-Tibetan Friendship Association as well as the Tibet Justice Center, which is an international legal association for Tibet.

For the past ten years, I have been working in the organization founded by my mother during her retirement for building elementary schools in the villages of Ladakh, which also takes up a significant portion of my time. All in all, though, I don't do anything exceptional. Not all Tibetans, but many of them, are involved with Tibet to the same degree. All Tibetans share an equally considerable degree of involvement and level of political awareness. Considering the fact that there were only 2,500 Tibetans in Switzerland for a long time – many Swiss assume that the community of exiled Tibetans in the country is much larger – we have a significant voice. Other, equally large groups of foreigners don't often have the same level of participation.

In contrast to myself, my brother is a professional activist. He has worked for Greenpeace, as the press spokesman for the Green Party in Zurich, and is now employed by a campaign forum that holds and provides professional consulting for political campaigns. He is one of the most well-known Swiss activists for Tibet. He played a significant role in bringing Tibetan activists together in the



context of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. He presided over the National Tibetan Olympic Committee, which, from the very onset, advocated Tibet's involvement in the case that the Olympic Games were awarded to Beijing. In 2006, he and three others unrolled a banner reading "Hu, you can't stop us! 2008-FreeTibet.org" in front of the Olympic countdown clock in Beijing. The message was addressed to President Hu Jintao, who was leading the assembly of the National People's Congress on that day. The campaign received media attention.

Wangpo holds an 80 percent position. In his free time, he is constantly involved in activism for Tibet. He is married to a Tibetan and lives next door to my parents in Jona (Canton St. Gallen). They have two children. He had been considerably interested in Tibetan history as a teenager. My parents, who have always received visits from interested representatives of the Tibetan community, can always count on Wangpo to be an attentive audience.

My oldest sister is also married to a Tibetan. Together, they have three children, and they also live on the same street as my parents in Jona. She works in the personnel department of a US company. Tenzin has two children, was married to a Swiss citizen, and is now divorced. She lives in Zurich and works as a secretary. Our youngest brother, Rigzin, is married to a Swiss woman, and they have five children. He is a self-employed professional in the transport industry.

I speak only Tibetan to my children. They understand everything, but because it is more comfortable for them, they almost always answer in Swiss German. They use Tibetan when they have a request or when they want to make me happy. It is important for me that they know that they are Tibetan – not half Tibetan, half Swiss, but rather full-fledged Tibetans and full-fledged Swiss.

I want them to be just as proud of their Tibetan heritage and roots as they are of their Swiss lineage, and I think that they are. Being Tibetan always has some association with China. Being born Tibetan automatically means later taking on a political stance. When my youngest daughter was in a theater course that was putting on a play with Chinese princesses, she requested that the parts not be included, and so they became Tibetan princesses. My daughters are aware of what is happening in

China insofar as is appropriate for their respective ages, and I am very happy about the fact that the theater teacher told me about what had happened in class.

Being Tibetan the way I choose to live as one also includes religion. My daughters are officially Buddhists. I try to teach them to respect other religions by never putting them down. In cases where the Christian belief system is dominant, I explain to them that we are Buddhists and how we see things. When my oldest daughter was in preschool and they were discussing Jesus around Christmas time, she announced that Jesus was nice, but not everyone believed in him. My children know that there are different ways to see things and my goal is that they achieve a certain degree of independence when it comes to the way they think about religion.

Buddhism corresponds to the way I choose to live and is in no way a contradiction to day-to-day life. I don't bury myself in religious writings, but place value on adhering to the basic principles in which I personally believe – such as compassion – and attempt to pass them on to my children. We don't kill ants simply because they walk past us. These principles are all things that are essentially normal when raising children. My husband has officially left the church, but not because of me. A belief system doesn't hold great importance in his family. My husband is not Buddhist and not only respects, but indeed values my religion.

At home, I try to consciously emphasize the Tibetan side of things because our entire environment is Swiss. I take my children to Tibetan events, such as the annual general assembly of the Association of Tibetan Youth, which I used to be a part of. The meeting is a wonderful, culturally rich, three-day event. Such opportunities allow them to experience the Tibetan community and make friendships with other Tibetan children outside of our family. I also take them to other pro-Tibet events.

In terms of the way they look, my daughters are Tibetan. I consider important that they also know that they are Tibetan. In addition to everything about them that is Swiss, they should also be Tibetan on the inside. Such a sense of awareness and knowledge of the Tibetan culture is important

in their search for their own identity. If they only looked Tibetan and had Tibetan names without knowing the language or the culture and without feeling like Tibetans, it would cause a conflict.

In 2006, we visited my father's family in India and my mother's family in Ladakh. My daughters were six and nine at the time we went, and I didn't want to wait any longer in terms of their ages. If the first contact happens when they are teenagers, they might be shy, or maybe they won't like the food. I wanted them to get to know the country and their family just like our parents did with us. My children saw that not all people lived in a house with a refrigerator, a television, and a telephone. My thinking was that they would benefit greatly from a sense of awareness that our standard of living isn't the same that everyone in the world has.

My husband and our two children, my parents, Wangpo with his wife and their younger son, and Tenzin and her now ex-husband and their two children, all came along. We ended up traveling at slightly different times, but met together as a group. That especially gave the children an opportunity to spend time with their cousins.

My youngest daughter – at the time, she was the youngest in the group – essentially had it the easiest. She wanted to be near her great-grandmother during mealtimes and other occasions even though she was already very old at that point and they could barely communicate due to the difference between Tibetan and Ladakhi. Just like her older sister, though, she also spent a significant amount of time together with her cousins. It was a wonderful experience for them and for me, especially because everything went as smoothly as I had hoped.

Today, my siblings and I are all naturalized Swiss citizens. Naturalization is a double-edged sword: refugee status is unsatisfying – not to mention completely absurd when you were born and raised in Switzerland. At the same time, there is still a sense of betraying part of one's own identity during the process. You have to give up the one hundred percent right to being Tibetan, at least legally. The good part is that the Tibetan exile government will provide you with an exile Tibetan

identification card in exchange for the donation of a “people’s contribution,” making it possible to have both nationalities at the same time.

My father still has his refugee status today. He came to Switzerland with a steadfast determination to return to Tibet, and when raising the children – both the foster children as well as his own – he always made it clear that it is our duty to return to Tibet with a good education. For him, it would have been a contradiction to have that goal while taking on Swiss citizenship at the same time, thereby having to give up his refugee status. My father remains very active today: he writes, researches, and is still an inquisitive, educated man. My mother, even though she is Indian, was considered to be Tibetan through her marriage to my father, even at the Children’s Village, and she now finds fulfillment through her work for the development of the elementary school in Ladakh.

I marvel at my parents, and especially at my father. He lost every one of his material possessions and was separated from some of his closest relatives when the Chinese occupied Tibet, yet he has never once complained about his own fate; he has only complained about the fact that Tibet is not independent. His satisfaction in life is real and in no way superficial, and his own personal character and Buddhist attitude assuredly contribute to this mindset.

The Tibetan community in Switzerland has since grown to some 3,000 individuals due to the arrival of other young Tibetan refugees who arrived in Switzerland through India. These new immigrants are no longer treated collectively, but instead according to the individual procedures for asylum seekers. Tibetans in Switzerland share many positive similarities, such as the importance of family or involvement for one’s own country. The latter is, on average, more pronounced than is the cases with the Swiss; they rarely have any general mentality issues.

The fact that the immigration process went so smoothly is in part due to the Tibetans’ arrival in Switzerland as families, not just young men. That fact represents a difference from other refugee groups. It also means that the traditional Tibetan structures never completely broke up.

Another reason is that the Dalai Lama served as a key figure for leadership and immigration for Tibetan refugees in Switzerland. He is not only our religious leader, but is also an influential political figure. The Tibetans also have a relatively strong organizational structure. The Association of Tibetan Youth in Europe was nowhere as active as it was in Switzerland. The Swiss-Tibetan Friendship Association has also played an important role in forming ties between Tibetans and Swiss, just like their name implies.

A particularly decisive factor is that the Tibetans were settled in Switzerland as groups. Had they been individually scattered throughout the country, the high degree of organization would not have been possible. Entry into Switzerland in groups and the placement of these groups as entities was ideal. The Tibetans' integrity was preserved, and even promoted, and that was one of the things for which Switzerland deserves credit when it comes to the Tibetan refugees.

The result was the formation of strong Tibetan communities in various regions across Switzerland, such as Rikon (Canton Zurich), Flawil (Canton St. Gallen), in the city of Zurich, in Linthal (Canton Glarus), Horgen (Canton Zurich), Trogen (Canton Appenzell Ausserrhoden), as well as in Balzers in the Principality of Liechtenstein. All of these municipalities, and others, have peoples' representatives who meet with the Tibetan community throughout all of Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

The organization does not necessarily mean financial or moral support; these are roles that are generally covered by the family structure. The Tibetan community constitutes a structure of being taken care of. There is also the important role of the monastic Tibet Institute in Rikon. The Institute provides a place for traditional rituals and ceremonies to be held, such as when someone passes away, which conveys another important sense of home – or a replacement for home. Tibetans in Switzerland know there is a guarantee that they will have the “right” kind of burial when they die. For many members of our community, it is extremely important to have this sense of security. The

structures, in turn, lead to numerous other events and activities, which also contribute to creating a sense of involvement.

One final element which makes things easier for Tibetans in Switzerland is the generally high level of education. The experience that you can lose your land, your money, and everything that you own from today to tomorrow has influenced the way that Tibetans see the importance of academic education. Knowledge and skills are two things no one can take away from you.

Without any sense of ingratitude, it can be said that the Tibetans are thankful that the Swiss government so openly accepted them and that they were allowed to live the life that they wanted to. Had they been treated with more political restrictions, things assuredly would have turned out completely differently. Major events, such as the Dalai Lama's visit, also take goodwill. And the Tibetans appreciate such kindness.

The awareness that Tibetans truly enjoy good conditions in Switzerland is a topic which resurfaces time and again. One time, my parents invited some elderly Tibetans with whom they had once been acquainted to their home. They talked about how good it is to live in Switzerland – if you don't earn enough, you even receive a subsidy to pay for health insurance. This was a touching point. It in no way expresses a sense of entitlement but instead shows that opportunities are truly valued in Switzerland. In today's times, that is something which may seem surprising. But that appreciation is not merely an opinion held by older Tibetans: even the younger generation is well aware of that fact.

Politically, things are different today. The first Tibetans back in 1960 were considered exotic and innocent. The number of foreigners was very different. They were met with a different sense of openness than today's immigrants.

Speaking for myself, I am surely more Tibetan than Swiss; at the same time, I wouldn't make too large of a differentiation. Both sides were always present in the way in which I grew up. I live according to both a Tibetan as well as a Swiss standard of living and try to make the best out of both

in a way that works best for me. In day-to-day life and in public, except for my appearance, there is nothing which makes me any different than any Swiss woman.

The most important thing to me is my entire family. For my children, my hope – besides the fact that they are successful in their educations – is that they continue to be conscious of their heritage and that they remain involved, both in the private as well as in the public realm. Not forgetting the culture is one thing; the other is staying aware of the political situation. The Tibetan situation is always a political one. You can't simply be interested in the mountains or some other part. This sense of awareness is something I would like to pass on to them – in addition, of course, to everything else that everyone wishes for their children.

Tibet's current situation makes me concerned, and for the short term, there seems to be no improvement on the horizon. Based on recent events, the Chinese are launching a so-called "re-education" process. For the Tibetans in the country, it is devastating. The truly catastrophic part is that no one really hears anything and that the public doesn't know what is really happening. All Tibetans are watching the situation with great unease. At the same time, the events in Tibet since March 2008 have shown that the Tibetan population continues to revolt against Chinese rule and has in no way resigned itself to accepting it. With its policies, the Chinese government is only reinforcing that position. The resistance and courage of my fellow countrymen is something that fills me with pride.

My hope – just like the hope of all Tibetans and presumably many others around the world – is that the situation will change for the people of Tibet. It is a fact that Tibet was an independent country. It now no longer is one, and it potentially won't be again for a long period of time. For that reason, the most important thing at this point is to find a solution that allows the Tibetans to have a peaceful life despite the Chinese rule. That solution must include a guarantee of basic human rights as well as a perspective on life. The Chinese also have the same problem with the Uyghurs and the

Mongolians; it is just that the rest of the world hears much less from them and from other minority groups. The Chinese fear the precedent that they would create with better conditions in Tibet.

Due to the blatant disregard for human rights, I, as a Swiss citizen, find it distressing how much Switzerland is officially bowing to the Chinese. No one should put up with just anything. Given the request not to officially receive the Dalai Lama, the Swiss government should not be anxious to avoid stepping on China's feet in anticipatory obedience. There is no reason that a democratic country should be bowing down to a country that can in no form be called democratic. This is the last way, in fact, to earn the respect of the People's Republic: the only thing the Swiss will accomplish is ensuring that the Chinese do not take them seriously.

*Recounted on May 22, 2008 in Uznach, Canton St. Gallen.*



## **VI. Husein Kararic: “We are true Berners”**

*His son was only four months old when Husein Kararic was sent to the Trnopolje concentration camp in his hometown in Northwest Bosnia. After being liberated by the International Committee of the Red Cross, he found his way to Switzerland in the framework of the “Aktion 1000/5000.” His family was able to follow. Today, they are all Swiss citizens.*

I was born on April 1, 1969 in Trnopolje in the Northwest Bosnian town of Prijedor, located roughly fifty kilometers west of Banja Luka. Before the war, the small village was home to 750 farms and farming families, totaling some 2,000 to 3,000 people.

My father was a mason. He worked for a Croatian company building viaducts for many years. Later, he went on to work for the same company in Germany. At the time of the Yugoslav Federation, Muslims, Croats, and Serbians worked together side by side at the same company, just like everywhere else. When my father was working in Munich, he returned home every second week. He then visited us about once every two months while he was stationed in Frankfurt am Main. We saw him fairly regularly. My mother worked as a full-time homemaker. I have two sisters. One was born in 1974, the other in 1981.

In Trnopolje, we farmed three hectares of land, which included livestock. Our family had been in agriculture for generations. The Bosnian population was very poor until after World War II. Starting in 1965, many Bosnians left for Western Europe as guest workers – especially to Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium – to earn money and to support their families at home. Many of them built new homes, purchased farm machines and cars, or paved roads.

From an ethnic perspective, Bosnia is a very complex entity, making it completely impossible to divide it into demographic groups. Serbs, Croats, and Muslims were not the only ones who lived in Trnopolje; until the Bosnian War broke out, it was home to thirteen different

nationalities, including Roma. Roman Catholics and Russian Orthodox Ukrainians even moved there prior to World War II.

In the municipality of Prijedor, which, alongside Trnopolje, included other farming villages, the official 1991 statistics revealed 6,300 or 5.6% Croatsians, 49,454 or 44% Muslims, and 47,745 or 42.5% Serbs. Other nationalities totaled 8,981 or 7.9% of the population. Altogether, 112,470 people lived there. The circumstances were similar across Bosnia. Of the 4,364,649 Bosnians, 755,883 or 17.3% were Croatsians, 1,905,274 or 43.7% were Muslims, 1,369,883 or 31.4% were Serbs in 1991. 333,609 or 7.6% belonged to other nationalities.

Intermarriage was common. One of my cousins married a Serb and had two children with him. This was another reason that ethnic classifications have always essentially been impossible and objectionable.

I went to school in Trnopolje from 1975 to 1983. Afterward, I attended vocational school in Prijedor for three years and completed a traineeship as a butcher. In 1987, I passed the examination for my car and tractor driver's license. Between June 1988 and June 1989 – the summer before the Wall fell, when many Eastern Germans left the country via Hungary – I completed my military service.

I noticed nothing of the Cold War, the tensions between the East and the West, or inter-Yugoslav difficulties during my entire childhood and adolescence. The other children at my school were Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. We worked together after our years at school, completed our military service side by side, and hung out at the disco with each other. Our next-door neighbor was Serbian. Trnopolje was a reflection of all of Bosnia with a slight majority of Muslims, many Serbs, and a considerable number of Croatsians.

The political turmoil at the end of my military service was noticeable in the sense that I wasn't able to find a job in my profession. The economic difficulties heralded the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. I was registered with an unemployment agency similar to the regional employment

centers in Switzerland, but primarily farmed different crops at home by tractor, including potatoes, tomatoes, or beans, all of which grow well in Trnopolje with its climate similar to Switzerland's. The village's altitude is just below 500 meters, or 1640 feet. Only spring and fall arrive somewhat earlier than in Switzerland. The name of the village is made up of *trn*, which means rose thorn, and *polje*, which means field. The plain around Trnopolje used to be full of thorns, but has been cultivated ever since I can remember.

Except for when it came to our own animals, I never worked as a butcher until the war. The economic situation remained weak. Many companies were going through a time of crisis. Inflation was rising. People purchased German Marks or Austrian Schillings because the Yugoslavian Dinar was no longer stable. Its value would sometimes decline by half from day to day.

During all of these events – on January 12, 1991, when I was 22 years old – I got married. My wife is from Kozarac, located around six kilometers, or four miles, from Trnopolje, and which is the part of the Prijedor municipality in the foothills that extends into the mountains. We had met in the summer of 1989 after my return from the military on *corsos*, or tours through the city of Kozarac, which we teenagers always took on Fridays and Saturdays. My wife's family was also Muslim. She had completed eight years of compulsory schooling followed by three years of vocational school with training as a shoemaker.

We first married inside our family circle and then had to wait for the court wedding, which was held on May 11, 1991; officially, we have only been married since then. Neither ceremony took place in a church. Bosnia's Muslim tradition is very liberal. In contrast to the Arab countries, women do not wear a headscarf. Communism did the rest to the open interpretation of Islam. At the same time, Prijedor had around twenty mosques, five Catholic churches, and around one dozen Serbian Orthodox churches, even during the time of socialism. It was only during the war that all mosques and Catholic churches, as well as some of the cemeteries, were razed, blown up with dynamite, or

destroyed by armored infantry. Until the outbreak of the war, I continued to work at home together with my wife.

The war didn't start immediately. The first incidents took place in Slovenia when my wife and I had only been living together for one month. The Croatian War also began in 1991. There were only a couple of occurrences in Slovenia. In Croatia, though, heavy armaments and infantry were used. Many refugees sought protection in Bosnia or Slovenia. Normal people started worrying about how things would continue.

The political situation in Bosnia was also becoming more tense. Three nationalist parties were opposing one another: the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the Bosnian Party of Democratic Action (SDA), and the Croatian Democratic Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH). Today, we know that Croatian politician Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević had arranged the division of Bosnia at the onset of the Croatian War. One part was intended to fall into Serbian hands; the other into Croatian. The plan also included the division of peoples, which was referred to as ethnic cleansing. The situation then spun out of control. When the Bosnian government announced its independence, the SDS boycotted the corresponding referendum.

Human relationships in the population changed. Whether you were a Serbian or a Bosnian started to become increasingly important. All ethnicities were more frequently exposed to the statements made by their nationalist party leaders. The situation was tense, but calm. Everyone was afraid. The parties' rhetoric became more venomous. There was an exceptional amount of propaganda. But the people offered resistance. In our immediate neighborhood, we experienced few concrete effects of nationalism. Until the last day, we didn't believe that war would break out. We assumed there would be isolated skirmishes in Slovenia, but not with such a vehement threat of life for Muslims as we would go on to experience.

Our son, Haris, was born on January 27, 1992. Then the war began, first in Sarajevo, where territorial militias – who had a similar task to the Swiss civil defense forces – fought against

paramilitary Serbian organizations. At that time, it was already possible that a member of the Serbian civil defense would have to come face to face with a member of the Serbian paramilitary.

The war then spilled over into other parts of Bosnia, starting in Ravno on the southern border to Herzegovina. The situation was already strained across Bosnia. Ravno was the first place where the Serbian paramilitary attacked the Bosnian population, resulting in casualties.

Due to increasing fear, everyone who was able to and had family abroad tried to flee the country. The outbound passage to the West had already become difficult because of the war in Croatia where there was a risk of coming between the lines of the Serbs and the Croats. For that reason, many Bosnians fled to the West via Serbia or even Romania, Hungary, and Austria.

My father was also affected by the growing nationalism. Although all ethnicities had once worked together for his Croatian boss without an issue, there was suddenly no more room for Muslims or Serbs. Everything in the former Yugoslavia and Bosnia was “cleansed” down to the company level. This by no means only affected only construction companies, but schools and hospitals, too. But my father was lucky. Because he had already spent many years working in Germany, he had a work visa and was able to stay there. All other relatives, including my wife’s parents, had to remain in Bosnia. My two sisters continued to go to school.

Our confidence about not having to leave our house was shattered in May 1992. At first, it was paramilitary armed forces who pillaged for two days. Those forces included the “Tigers” of Željko Ražnatović, also known as *Arkan*; the troops of the ultranationalists and leaders of the Radical Serbian Party Vojislav Šešelj, the *Šešeljevci*; as well as members of the Serbian Chetnik movement. The attacks were organized in collaboration with the Serbian population. It was only then that the Serbian army came down from Mount Kozara in the Kozara National Park near Prijedor. But from the first day of the war on, the region found itself surrounded by Serbian armed forces.

My wife and I left our home in time, on May 24, with our son, my two sisters, and my mothers after the two days of pillaging. We fled together with other Muslim neighbors and initially found shelter with a cousin in Sivci, the northern part of Trnopolje.

When the Serbian army entered the war, the first thing they did was to round everyone up who had a good profession – doctors, lawyers, and other highly qualified individuals such as teachers – in Prijedor's main square. In general, the victims were affluent people who had lived well. But it was also enough to have the wrong name, that is, to be a Muslim or a Croat. The concept that the area surrounding Prijedor and Banja Luka should be reserved for the Serbs was already in place.

On the second day of the war, the Serbs had already organized three concentration camps in the Prijedor municipal area: Keraterm in the city on the grounds of the former ceramic factory, Omarska on the mine grounds southwest of Prijedor, and Trnopolje on the grounds of the elementary school that I had attended. The Trnopolje camp also extended to include the soccer stadium and the store for agricultural goods, comparable to a Landi store in Switzerland. The triangular premises measured around five hectares.

By that time, all of our Serbian neighbors had become members of a paramilitary organization. These militia, which were predominantly under the leadership of Arkan, Šešelj, and the Serbian army, subsequently appropriated all houses, agricultural machinery, vehicles, and livestock that had belonged to Muslim citizens. The larger portion of the vehicle fleet went to Serbia; our former neighbors received the smaller portion. The same thing happened to our property. Our house was destroyed during the course of the war. None of our furniture in or around the house and barn remained. The women in the neighborhood helped themselves to our equipment and clothing in the house as they pleased. We sometimes had to witness others wearing our clothes.

We remained at my cousin's house until May 26. We once attempted to flee onward toward the forests on Mount Kozara, but were forced to return back because of the even greater threat of the Serbian militias. We also watched as the houses further below, including my wife's parents' house,

were set in flames. While doing so, we knew nothing about the whereabouts of my parents-in-law and their family.

Because we couldn't stay at my cousin's house for long, we continued on to an aunt whose large house was already acting as home to other relatives and had become full. On the morning of July 9 – the Serbian militias had received further reinforcements on that day – soldiers entered the courtyard. When the armed forces invaded, my wife was outside where there was an additional toilet. They wanted to know where she had been. They then issued an order to pack up and leave the house. My wife took Haris and a suitcase with clothing, just like everyone else who could do nothing more than pack the things within closest reach into a bag.

We were forced onto the street toward the school, stadium, and agricultural store. 10,000 people had already been herded together in the concentration camp in the first two days. We were then separated. The women and children were forced to keep following the road. The men were steered off to the right onto the school grounds, which was now the concentration camp.

Trnopolje is situated along the Zagreb-Banja Luka train line. All women, children, and those over 65 were escorted to the train station; from there, they were transported in cattle cars toward Doboj in Central Bosnia. Men from 14 to 65 remained at the Trnopolje Concentration Camp. Most of them were Bosnians, but some were Croatians or Roma, too. There was also a small number of women – especially those who were better off and better educated – who were kept prisoner in a separate house and abused. That percentage of women was somewhat larger in Omarska and Keraterm.

The Serbian government's plans had been realized. Relatives of all ethnicities from Prijedor were to be removed except the Serbs. On June 9, the eastern side of Prijedor, including Trnopolje, was "cleansed." Some of the men ended up at the local concentration camp; others were sent to Omarska. The second part of the "ethnic cleansing" took place on the western side of Prijedor on June 17.

Not only my wife and I were separated, but out families, were, too, because we belonged to the first part and they belonged to the part that was later “cleansed.” My uncle was killed during the operation. We also know that 120 people were killed on June 17. People died in the region every day after the onset of the war. The only thing that is unknown is how many.

Beginning on June 9, the start of my time in the camp, every man had to fear for his life. After the majority of women, children, and elderly were removed, between 2,500 and 3,000 men remained. Another uncle and a cousin from my family were with me in the concentration camp. A life was no longer worth anything – it was worth no more than the smoke of a cigarette from a soldier who wanted a victim and shot him down with the machine gun.

I was not politically active. Politics didn’t interest me as a matter of principle and even less at that moment. When the guards alternately came with a piece of paper and a few names on it and said, “you,” “you,” “you,” those people followed them and never came back. I knew many of the individuals who were picked up.

The headquarters from where the Serbian government’s commands came was located in Omarska. Individuals from Trnopolje or Keraterm were taken there and interrogated with questions such as whether they possessed or kept a concealed weapon, if they were politically affiliated, or whether they had ever been involved in a dispute with a Serbian neighbor. If someone had once had a conflict, they were conceivably killed. We knew that those who were taken to Omarska never came back. We later learned that provocation of Serbian soldiers led to fights and murders. A particularly large number of female abuse cases also took place in Omarska.

Those of us in Trnopolje were afraid every day. Sometimes the soldiers would write a name down onto their cigarette package in front of our faces. If you lived through the daylight, when darkness fell, you didn’t know whether you would survive the night. Once, the militias came looking for me under my nickname, “Huse,” but they didn’t know that name. I owe my life to that fact.



The Serbian government barely gave us anything to eat the entire summer. On several occasions, I visited my aunt's house – also abandoned since May 24, 1992 – which had a 1,000-square meter garden bordering the camp fence. I went there to get food such as onions, bell peppers, and potatoes. Such visits were possible because I had my identification card, which by no means everyone had. The guards took my ID and allowed me to take a short trip to the neighboring property, located some 200 meters, or 650 feet, away, for twenty or thirty minutes – “at my own responsibility.” They kept their sniper guns trained on me as I crossed the field. Upon my return, they returned my ID. This process allowed me to bring back a plastic bag full of vegetables on a few select occasions.

One of the people in the camp was a doctor who had run a small outpatient clinic in Trnopolje prior to the war and who had been our neighbor and family doctor. Although he didn't have any medications, he helped people with everything he knew how to do. He survived and now resides in Germany.

My health remained relatively good during my months in the camp given the situation, but I suffered from significant weight loss. At best, we received food once a day, but it was never very much. I normally weigh 85 kilograms, or about 187 pounds. After I was freed, I only weighed 58 kilograms, or 128 pounds. Several men died after just one month; I have forgotten how many. The majority of them had stomach and intestinal problems and suffered from persistent diarrhea. Every now and then we made a primitive soup from food scraps in a tin can. We sporadically received water from a canister on the other side of the street where we had to stand in a long line. Today, the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia assumes that several hundred people were murdered in Trnopolje.

Having been alerted by initial press reports, it was the beginning of August when the International Red Cross and other journalists reached Prijedor. For several days, the eyes of the entire

world were on Keraterm, Omarska, and Trnopolje as it realized what kind of atrocities had taken place at the Serbian concentration camps.

The Serbs feared the consequences and attempted to conceal the crimes they had committed. First, Keraterm was shut down, and the men were taken to Trnopolje or Omarska. Omarska was also closed in August several days later. The International Committee of the Red Cross then registered every man in the concentration camp. That registration meant more, but not one hundred percent, safety.

After that, everything got better. The ICRC distributed food – one truck from the center of the organization in Banja Luka reached us per day – and organized normal water supply using a large cistern. We received 300 grams of bread, one can of food, and dried lentils daily. In order to cook the lentils, though, we would have needed some type of cooking facility. My aunt's neighboring property again proved useful: we moved a stove over from one of the property's buildings. We brought in firewood using a wheelbarrow.

The International Red Cross demanded the release of all men. The Serbian government rejected the demand on the claims that we could have gone to a part of the country controlled by the Bosnian army to fight against the Serbs. Ten-day negotiations between the ICRC and the government of the Republic of Serbia resulted in the decision that every man had to sign a piece of paper stating that we voluntarily bequeathed our entire possessions to the Republic of Serbia and the Serbs as well as that we would leave and go to another country instead of to Central Bosnia. The ICRC had already begun establishing correspondence with relatives. The entire time, I didn't know where my family was – and they, too, were just as much in the dark regarding my own fate.

My uncle, my cousin, and I, all of whom had survived the concentration camp, were given the opportunity to write several search letters to any relative who might come into question. After a week, we received a response from my cousin who lived and worked in Zagreb. My wife, my son, my mother, and my sisters had all reached him and thus made it to safety. My father had then arrived

from Germany and had found an apartment for them in Zagreb. The news was the biggest relief that I have ever gotten in my life. During my time in the concentration camp, I received five or six additional letters from my family through ICRC intermediation.

We didn't yet know where we would end up. For the older camp inmates between 55 and 65, the Serbs organized a truck – or, for those who could afford it – bus transport between the Serbian and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian front. Men in this age group were no longer considered a risk. Then the Korićani Cliffs Massacre happened on Mount Vlašić, a mountain near Travnik. As the convoy reached the mountain, soldiers from the military escort forced around 250 men out of the vehicles, shot them, and threw them several hundred meters over the Korićani Cliffs into the ravine.

For my part, I was one of those registered to be taken to Karlovac in Croatia by ICRC transport on October 1. There were around 1,600 of us men. The convoy comprised around fifty cars. In Karlovac, the UNHCR and the ICRC stationed us in a former army barracks. Every man received a medical examination and was interviewed. During that time, further details about my family's whereabouts also reached me.

On June 9, 1992, after I was forced into the camp, my wife was commanded to the train station together with Haris, my sisters, and my mother. They were forced to wait in an old building because the train hadn't yet arrived. My mother didn't have any food for Haris. The militias distributed bread which Haris ate a little of at only four months old. My wife also found something to spread on it. When the train arrived, everyone was checked and forced into the freight cars. No one knew where the train was headed.

After a long ride, the first transport – the second took place on June 17 – reached Doboj, where the passengers were forced to get out near the Bosna River. The militias accompanied them to a part of the river where there was a military pontoon bridge and told them that they could go and be free. While they were crossing the river, the rifles of the Serbian militias were targeted onto the refugee convoy.

In reality, the Bosnian army was waiting for the expellees on the other side. The women with small children received milk. Civilians were also there with cars, trucks, or tractors to pick up the elderly. The younger ones had to continue on foot; the footpath led through the forest up onto a mountain. My wife was carrying Haris. Late at night, they arrived at a village where they were received by the residents. In the case of my wife and her relatives, they were taken in by a young family with two or three children who cooked for them and washed Haris' clothing so that he would have something clean to wear again. The first thing they did was to wash the cloth diapers; my wife didn't have any disposable with her. On the morning of June 10, they rose early and went over the mountain to Maglaj as a group. The path from Doboј to Maglaj is around 25 kilometers, or 15 miles, long.

In Maglaj, the refugees were housed in a school where they slept close together on the floor. Those who had a blanket could consider themselves lucky. On June 11, they traveled by train to Zenica from where busses were waiting to take them to different locations. My family again ended up in a gymnasium. My mother went out in search of water so that my wife could wash the baby; he hadn't had a bath in days. They would then be able to dress him again.

The gymnasium was overcrowded and noisy. There were many children, but old men and women, too. People used the rubber mats from the gym. There were only two for my family. The women hung the clean diapers out on the wall bars to dry.

Once, when my mother and sisters were gone for a short period and my wife sat alone with Haris on a mat, two women approached her and asked whether she was alone and if the child was hers. My wife answered their questions, in response to which the woman explained that her husband had sent her. They lived in a high-rise building next door and wanted to take a woman and child in. They had seen the large number of refugees get out of the train. The husband had been moved by the scene. Then the woman also explained that she was Croatian and her husband Serbian.

My wife was unsure and wanted to first ask her mother-in-law; she also didn't want to leave her. She asked for some time to think it over. Finally, my mother agreed. It was only as they were on their way to the apartment that my wife told my mother about the couple's religious affiliation. My mother then became uneasy, too: after all, it was Serbs who had displaced them.

The hostess assured them that they didn't need to worry and was finally able to convince them that she had good intentions. My mother was allowed to go along so that she would know where her daughter-in-law and grandson were. The family lived in a three-bedroom apartment on the fifteenth floor and had two children. My wife stayed there for eight or nine days. The husband was a taxi driver and always brought fruit for Haris because he knew that my mother didn't have any. My mother was also allowed in and out of the apartment for different reasons, such as to take a shower. My wife was able to cook for her relatives in the apartment and take the food to the gymnasium.

My mother had a little bit of money and looked into an option for getting to Zagreb. She had talked to my father and knew that they would be able to find accommodations with his nephew. Eight days later, she found out that there was a bus leaving for Croatia the next day for those who could afford it. Many of the refugees wanted to go to Germany via Croatia. To do so, they intended to take the ferry from the Croatian coast to Istria because the road along the Croatian coast was blocked and dangerous due to the fronts. On the day of their departure, the taxi driver took my wife and Haris to the gymnasium. The family gave them money and saw them off.

The first bus was overcrowded. My family again waited in the gymnasium. They then found space in another bus in the afternoon. They reached Zagreb on June 20. And that is where they still were when I reached Karlovac in October and was able to establish contact with my family through the ICRC.

Then I saw my wife, my son, my mother, and my sisters again. I visited them in Zagreb several times. Although we lived in the barracks, we received visitation and exit permits without any issues. After Trnopolje, it seemed like a five star hotel.

Croatia didn't have the resources to take all of the refugees in Karlovac, so the ICRC organized for the expellees to go to other countries. My father put up a security that would take care of the entire family if they were allowed to go to Germany. That is how I arrived: in a group that traveled to Switzerland, with my goal of later continuing on to Germany. The refugees from Karlovac filled three airplanes. The flights from Zagreb into Switzerland took off on November 23, 24, and 25. I was assigned to the middle group. We were transported by coach from Zurich to a home in Geneva where we remained for ten days. From there we were taken to Goldswil, in the canton of Bern, near Interlaken.

In Goldswil we were given a medical examination with vaccinations. A piece of paper documented this border health inspection and confirmed that I entered the country as part of the "Bosnia-Herzegovina 1000/5000" campaign: it meant that number of Bosnian refugees, including their family members, received their entry permit. The stay in Goldswil lasted for about ten days. Due to my desire to continue on to Germany, I was subsequently sent to Basel where I, together with a large number of other refugees, waited for an entry permit from the German government.

We assumed that the process would take one or two days. We were supposed to travel in groups, not individually. Because my father was living in Karlsruhe at the time, I was supposed to travel in a group to get there. Nothing happened for two weeks. Many people became nervous. They didn't know how their far-flung families were doing and we didn't have any information about what would happen to them.

Finally, representatives of the former Federal Office for Refugees informed us that there was no more space in Germany for refugees. Germany had, indeed, taken in many expellees from the Bosnian War. We received information about emigrating to other countries such as Australia, Canada, or New Zealand. The information led to some demonstrations among the refugees, particularly due to uncertainty regarding family reunification. Some of them contemplated a hunger strike. Others wanted to return to Bosnia in case there was no possibility of continuing on.

In the end, we were taken back to Goldswil. The housemaster confirmed that it was not possible to settle in Germany, but presented us with the prospect of receiving help in Switzerland. Everything was to be organized so that our families could follow us. We were all even promised a B visa, the C permit after five years, as well as an immediate work permit for the adults. The Bosnia-Herzegovina initiative was thus extended to 5000 individuals as well as entire families.

An interview was held in Goldswil on March 10, 1993. It only took a quarter of an hour. I was then informed that I had been granted asylum. My mother and my two sisters were also welcome in Switzerland because they were not able to get to Germany, either. All refugees who were in the same situation were then scattered: some of them to Bern, some to Zurich, and some to Basel.

I was sent to a home in Bern where I waited for my family who, at the time, was still living in the apartment that my father had arranged in Zagreb. The Swiss embassy in Zagreb organized my family's travel. On March 29, 1993, my mother, my wife, my son, and my sisters reached their new homeland. They also were first sent to Goldswil, as I had been, for the same examinations.

In Goldswil, I had met a Turkish social worker who supported me a great deal. He lived in Zollikofen, in Canton Bern, and I had contacted him when I arrived in Bern. I was able to visit my family in Goldswil several times with his help – and these were the first times that we were together in Switzerland.

In late May, we received a large four-and-a-half room apartment in the Jupiterstrasse in Witikofen, a neighborhood of Bern with several high-rise buildings near the town where we now live. It was on the sixth floor and had enough room for my mother and my sisters. The Caritas paid for our expenses for five years. The aid organization provided us with a sum for furniture and every month, they provided for everything we needed: from the apartment to health insurance, television, food, and clothing. They also funded a German course that lasted six months and which we visited twice per week.

In material terms, we had no problems whatsoever. We were even issued a loan for additional furniture that we ended up turning down. We had no knowledge of the country, didn't know how things would work out, and were able to sleep more soundly at night knowing we didn't have to pay anything back. We purchased our first set of furniture second hand. When we were better off several years later, we replaced everything with new things.

My wife had brought our professional certifications and work books with her to Switzerland. We filed an application with the Swiss Federal Office for Industry, Trade, and Labor (*Biga*), now the Federal Office for Training and Technology, so that my diploma would be recognized. The application was approved and I started working for the large-scale butcher Meinen AG in the Schwarztor Street in the city center on March 15, 1995. I was satisfied. What was I supposed to do the entire day in the apartment? Just eating and gaining weight was not my goal; working and earning a salary were more important to me. In any case, we knew that we didn't want to remain dependent on the Caritas our entire lives. I was respected as a professional. Sometimes we had more work; sometimes less. Everything went smoothly. I never had any problems in that company nor in my present one. My salary was relatively modest in the beginning.

Our daughter, Merima, was born in the fall of 1995. At the time, my mother and my sisters were still living together with us. When Merima was one year old, my mother and sisters also found their own apartment in Bern. The Caritas was still managing our budget. When necessary, we received additional funds. In 1998 – when we had been in Switzerland for five years – our family received the C visa. Emir, our third child, was born on May 4, 1999.

I remained with Meinen through the end of 2000, for five years and ten months. In January 2001, I started my current job at the specialty butcher Mérat & Cie. AG in Bern, where my direct superior from my first company had become manager. He hired me at a higher salary.

My wife had no opportunity to work as a shoemaker in Switzerland. When Emir was three years old, she took a care worker course from the Swiss Red Cross. She graduated from the course by



completing an internship at a nearby facility. She had the chance to remain at an eighty percent position, which was too much for her back then. So she rejected the offer – which, from today's perspective, might have been a mistake.

In 2004, she began working on-call for the Spitex, which provides in-home care, for thirteen months. She again looked for a job at a care home or hospital, but was often rejected with the justification that she didn't have any experience. Since May 1, 2005, she has been working sixty percent in an assisted care facility in Wabern on the other side of Bern. That's still a lot in addition to the children. She would like to have a few fewer hours per week. It would be convenient to have a job closer to us with shorter commute times. Today, we are able to live well – but we have never been dissatisfied with the living standard in Switzerland.

After twelve years in Switzerland, in 2005, we were given the opportunity to apply for the simplified naturalization process. It generally takes at least 24 months. We were lucky. After just one and a half years, in August 2006, we received citizenship for the city of Bern – which makes us true Berners!

The children are doing very well. Hairs completed tenth grade in the summer of 2008. In August of the same year, he started a commercial apprenticeship with the company Thymos AG, which makes paint and natural building materials. He received his apprenticeship contract in January. The other children are making good progress in school. Merima is in seventh grade at the *Realschule*, and Emir is in third grade. At home, we speak Bosnian. But everywhere else, our children speak flawless Bern German – which they speak better their native language.

My father still lives in Germany. He has not been working since 2007. Today, he is more or less retired, which is partly due to health reasons. He suffers from heart issues and has had a bypass. After forty years as a mason, he also has back problems. He is planning to return to our property in Trnopolje and to rebuild everything, including, of course, the house – if that has not already happened.

The contract that I signed upon being liberated from the concentration camp is void; it goes without saying that I am not able to bequeath anything that does not belong to me. The house and property belonged to my father. Today, our property has been restored through the current legitimate government with all documents that substantiate that fact. The three hectares of land are again ours.

After an illness in August 2000, my mother is once again doing very well. She enjoys being together with our children. Because she only lives a few kilometers away, we are able to visit each other easily. My sisters lead independent lives. My older sister married a Bosnian four years ago. They have one child. The younger one – who was in third grade when we arrived in Switzerland – now works for Spitex.

Our entire family has since received Swiss citizenship. My mother and my older sister received it somewhat later because naturalization can only be granted exactly twelve years after initial entry into the country, at the earliest. In this sense, my wife belongs to me even though she came to Switzerland three months after my arrival. My mother and my older sister had to wait the corresponding period of time for citizenship, but my younger sister, who was still a child when we came to Switzerland, also counts as belonging to me according to Swiss law, even though she also arrived later. This is due to Swiss bureaucracy, which is very accurate and sophisticated.

Before we were granted our Swiss passports, we only had the blue travel documents for refugees. That made it impossible – prohibited, even – to travel to Bosnia, even after the end of the war and the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. My wife was thus not able to see her parents, who had survived the war, until we received Swiss citizenship. They were not able to visit us, either: during the war, it was forbidden to travel to other Western European countries, and then it only became possible with restrictions. Getting a visa took several trips to the consulate in Sarajevo. It wasn't an option for my parents-in-law to travel to a city 330 kilometers, or over 200 miles, away.

The situation meant that our only option was phone calls. It also meant that our children were unable to meet their other grandparents. A videotaped message was sent now and then. One year

after we received citizenship, my wife's mother died. It is still the source of significant pain for her today. My wife is now able to travel to Bosnia – but her mother, who she didn't see for twelve years after our abrupt escape and only saw three times after we received citizenship – is no longer there.

I have always said we were reborn in Switzerland. We did, in effect, begin a new life here. We are well integrated here, and so are our children. We often visit my wife's family in Bosnia on vacations. But we work here, and our life is in Switzerland. We were born there. But our children – with the exception of Haris, who, however, has no memory of it – were born here. Their future is in Switzerland, as is ours. We spend eleven months out of the year here and one in Bosnia, where we truly enjoy spending time. But we are always happy to return to Switzerland. We return home to the city of Bern and know that we will find security, work, and enough money to live. That is impossible in Bosnia.

Swiss natives have never given us the impression that we are foreigners here, even where we live. Our apartment building is made up of fifty percent foreigners anyway – more than the high-rise building where we lived before. We nevertheless had some concerns when the apartment in the other building was sold and we had to move after ten years. Many elderly people lived in the new building. There was only one family with children. I was unsure how they would receive us. But everything went better than expected. Today, our neighbors come and have dinner with us. We are building a garden plot nearby. We know many of our neighbors personally. We sincerely feel one hundred percent at home here.

*Recounted on June 18, 2008 in Bern.*

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